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Choice Overload, Attitude Formation Hierarchy, and Online Approach/Avoidance Behavior

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Keywords: Choice overload, attitude formation, product presentation, apparel online shopping

In the online environment, the capability of presenting/viewing an extensive range of products can be convenient for companies and customers. It has been one of the factors that contributed to the growth of electronic commerce (Turban et al., 2012). However, according to the research studies of choice overload, presenting too many options is likely to induce customer negative responses and be demotivating (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004).

To explore the effect of choice overload in the online environment, a model was developed and empirically examined in this study. This study examined how the number of choices offered on a website influences consumers' attitude formation and their approach/avoidance behavior (email subscription) and whether the presentation consistency can mitigate the effect of choice overload during online apparel shopping. Both focus group and questionnaire data collection methods were employed. A 3 X 3 factorial experimental design was employed with three levels of number of choices (24 vs. 60 vs. 120) and three levels of product presentation formats (Model vs. Flat vs. Hybrid). Furthermore, to control for style, gender, and age-related factors associated with apparel shopping, this study focused on women's tops with target population of female college students. The results of two focus groups (n = 17) were used to determine the three levels of number of choices to construct the mock websites and develop questionnaire items. A pretest (n = 97) was conducted to identify appropriate styles of tops to use in the stimuli. Three hundred and eighty-two usable responses from female college students were collected in the experiment.

The findings revealed that consumers go through the experiential hierarchy (Affective → Behavioral → Cognitive) of attitude formation to generate their approach/avoidance behavior when facing choice overload. When facing a large assortment, although the indirect effect from the number of choices to the email subscription is small, its substantial influence on affective responses of consumers can impact their other attitudinal reactions (cognitive and behavioral) toward the retailer and the consequential decision of email subscription.

Moreover, although participants explicitly indicated their dislike of the hybrid format during the focus group sessions, the findings of the study showed that the ways products were presented did not have a direct impact on consumers' affective responses. Additionally, the interaction of the amount of choice and presentation formats was not statistically significant. Thus, for apparel retailers, presenting apparel products (tops) in a hybrid format may be as effective as displaying the products in consistent formats (all human models or flats formats) as long as tools are available for customers to sort or reduce the total number of products displayed. Lastly, as email marketing is now a significant strategy in e-commerce, this study provides empirical findings to show the importance of offering an online shopping environment that enhances consumers' emotional experience.

References

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